

The President's Daily Brief

31 January 1973

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THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF

31 January 1973

PRINCIPAL DEVELOPMENTS

Sharp fighting is going on in Quang Tri Province, but military activity is tapering off in the rest of South Vietnam. (Page 1)

Peace negotiations in Laos are reaching a serious stage. (Page 2)

For the first time, exiled Prince Sihanouk has expressed interest in a compromise solution for the political situation in Cambodia. (Page 3)

Japan

(Page 4)

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West German

(Page 5)

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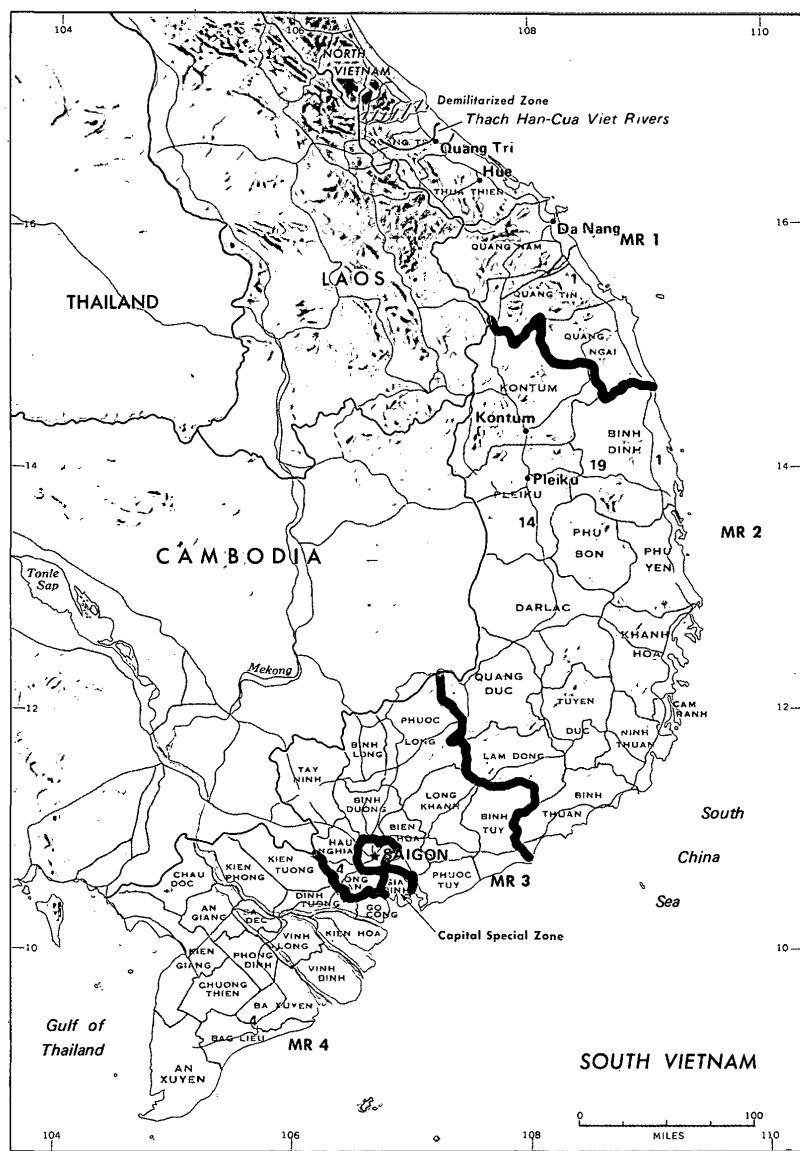
Most Latin American foreign ministers are reluctant to attend the UN Security Council meeting in Panama, but Castro and Allende may be thinking of going. (Page 7)

President Marcos is concerned that the US may be displeased about his martial law policies. (Page 8)

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SOUTH VIETNAM

Sharp fighting is under way in Quang Tri Province along the Cua Viet River. Communist attacks since 30 January have forced South Vietnamese Marines to abandon their newly won foothold at the mouth of the river. Government paratroopers along the Thach Han River, a few miles southwest of Quang Tri City, are taking heavy artillery fire and intercepts indicate that a small number of North Vietnamese troops are trying to cross the river in order to disrupt what looked to them as paratroop preparations for an assault.

Throughout the rest of the country, military activity continues to taper off. Sporadic clashes are occurring in the coastal provinces, as both sides vie for control of hamlets that dominate many points of Route 1. The enemy still holds many areas in Quang Ngai Province, and has raised the Viet Cong flag in several districts. Last minute ground gains are still being contested in Binh Dinh and Phu Yen provinces, but the government has recaptured nearly a score of hamlets in Binh Thuan Province. In the central highlands, roads to Kontum City are cut and the enemy is trying to isolate Pleiku as well.

No significant fighting has been reported around Tay Ninh City and all roads and waterways in the region are said to be open to government forces. In the delta, the Communists continue to make a large number of small-scale attacks.

* * *

South Vietnamese interrogation of a prisoner captured on 26 January indicates that North Vietnamese troops in Military Region 1 have been told that "older" soldiers among them will be sent home. Troops nearing the age of 25 will be considered for evacuation north to establish families, but younger men will remain to assist in the reconstruction of liberated areas. When men in the latter age group reach 25, their status will be reviewed to determine whether or not they should return home.

This account is plausible, inasmuch as earlier reports from prisoners had indicated that wounded and older North Vietnamese soldiers would be sent home within 60 days of a cease-fire. Most reports, however, indicate that the bulk of the North Vietnamese troops will remain in the south.

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LAOS

Both sides in the Lao conflict are attaching considerable importance to the session yesterday, when the Communists appeared ready to get down to serious business in negotiating a settlement. Communist chief negotiator Phoune Sipraseuth called the meeting a "turning point." Late yesterday, the government agreed to a private meeting of top negotiators of both sides to be held in Vientiane this afternoon. Prime Minister Souvanna is not due back home until later this week from his trip to New Delhi and Bangkok.

The private talks could be arduous. The two sides have not yet resolved major questions such as the shape and composition of a new provisional government and arrangements for the implementation and supervision of a cease-fire. During the session yesterday, the Communists made no issue of the continued US bombing in Laos and apparently do not intend to let this stand in the way of increasing the tempo of the negotiations.

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CAMBODIA

Sihanouk has for the first time publicly expressed interest in some sort of compromise solution for Cambodia. Before departing yesterday on a brief visit to Hanoi, he told a French journalist in Peking that in the next few days he and his "government" will "re-examine their attitudes" and "analyze the situation" in the wake of the Vietnam cease-fire. Sihanouk stated that such political soul-searching was necessary because "our friends"--a reference to his Chinese backers--had warned him that he risked being labeled a "warmonger" at a time when Lon Nol was launching a peace campaign. This admonition most likely was offered by Chinese Premier Chou En-lai, who met with Sihanouk last weekend.

Sihanouk nevertheless continued to insist that Lon Nol's removal is a prerequisite for any settlement. He said that he had rejected what he claimed was US and French pressure for a tripartite conference on Cambodia involving his "government," Washington, and Phnom Penh. Any political settlement, he argued, will require bilateral talks between his rump government and the US. He appeared skeptical about the prospects for such talks, however, citing his belief that the US would not abandon Lon Nol.

Sihanouk, while seeking to be responsive to Peking's desire for progress toward a negotiated settlement, apparently has some doubt that Hanoi and the Communist-dominated Khmer insurgents will go along.

Sihanouk hinted that he might have difficulty working out a common position with the North Vietnamese. His remarks strongly suggest that he believes Hanoi may be at odds with Peking over Cambodia.

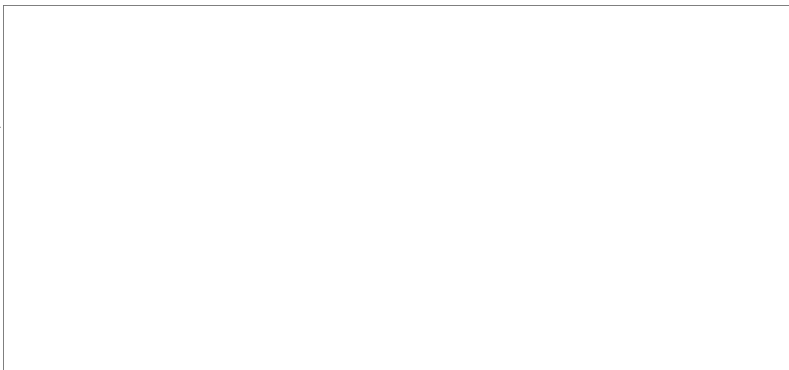
Over the years, Sihanouk has looked to China as Cambodia's principal benefactor and, Peking presumably would like to see him in some kind of major role in Cambodia. The North Vietnamese, however, in view of their large investment in the Khmer insurgency, are presumably not enthusiastic at the prospect of being upstaged by Sihanouk.

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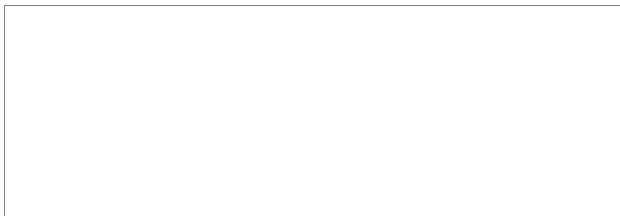
We have seen no significant change in the moderate level of enemy activity since the Cambodian Army's suspension of offensive actions on 29 January.

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JAPAN



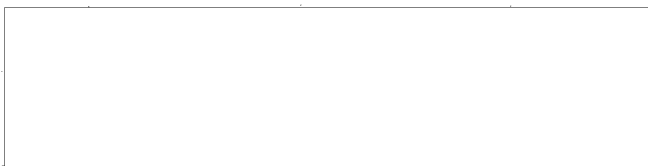
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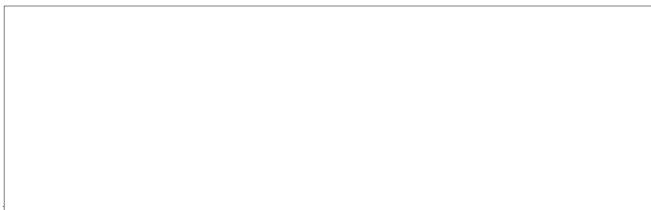
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WEST GERMANY - MBFR

As initial Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions talks open today, key government leaders in Bonn are continuing to debate whether West Germany should advocate a reduction of German as well as stationed forces. Defense Ministry officials take the view that German forces should be cut at the same time foreign forces are reduced. They argue that Bonn must share in the benefits of MBFR just as it shares the burden of common defense, and contend that reducing only US and Soviet forces would quickly generate domestic pressure for matching cuts in the German forces. They are also concerned that once the public becomes aroused over the issue of troop cuts, the government is likely to find it increasingly difficult to obtain adequate defense budgets.

Disarmament experts and Foreign Office officials, however, favor limiting initial troop reductions in Europe to "stationed" forces. They believe that Bonn must accommodate US desires on this issue and hope that US reductions in the MBFR context will eliminate the possibility of unilateral US cuts. They are also concerned that an early reduction of German forces would raise the issue of a Soviet role in verifying reductions, and that it could open the way for the USSR to influence the manner in which Bonn reorganizes its armed forces.

Foreign Minister Scheel and Defense Minister Leber will meet soon to attempt to reconcile these views, but the final decision will be made by the cabinet and Chancellor Brandt.

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JORDAN-EGYPT-SYRIA

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PANAMA

Most Latin American foreign ministers are reluctant to attend the UN Security Council meeting in Panama in March because they do not wish to be drawn into the dispute over the Canal Zone.

On the other hand, they also are reluctant to be left out of a hemispheric "event." If the larger countries decide to send high-level delegations, a bandwagon effect would develop quickly.

[redacted] Cuban Prime Minister Castro and Chilean President Allende will attend. We would have been inclined to view this report with reserve had not the UN chief of security been instructed this week to coordinate arrangements on the basis of similar information received by the UN.

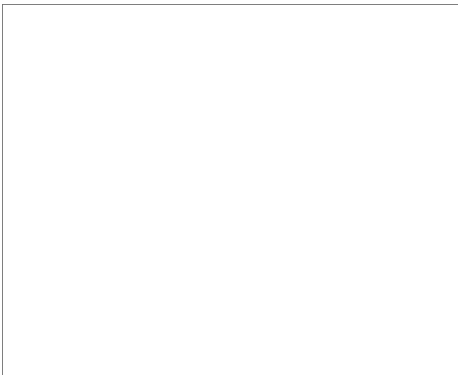
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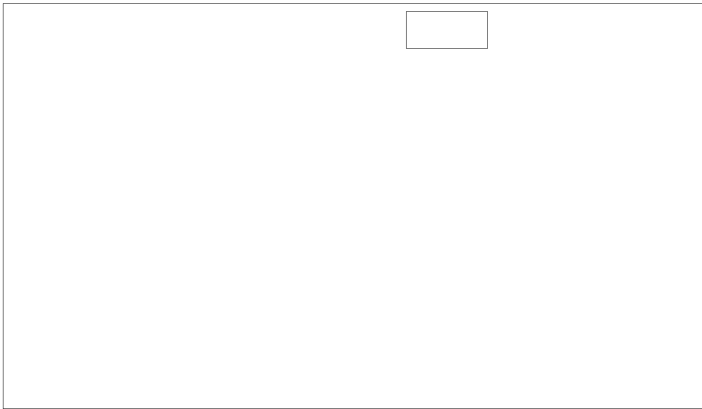
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NOTES

Philippines: President Marcos, who is counting on the US to provide the bulk of the aid he will need to carry out his ambitious reforms, is concerned over what he interprets to be signs of US displeasure over his martial law policies. He seems to be particularly upset over the exclusion of the Philippines from Vice-President Agnew's itinerary.

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